



PRESS RELEASE

Water system quenches a Maguindanaon's thirst for potable water

COTABATO CITY, Philippines – The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) recently funded a Community Water System to help the entire barangay of Kalanganan and its neighboring sitios build a permanent water system.

For Sahara Husain, a mother of two, an ample supply of water is a precious commodity. For as long she can remember, acquiring a reliable source of potable water was a long battle. Ironically, her name is the same as the world's largest desert, which is also chronically bereft of sufficient water.

Sahara however lives in a place far from that African wasteland, a locale that is surrounded by bodies of water. Her village in fact sits beside an estuary where the end of Rio Grande de Mindanao, the island-region's longest river, unites with Illana Bay. Despite the plethora of water supplies though, neither Sahara nor other residents of her village had the means to move the water efficiently from its source to the villagers.

"All my life we depended on trucks that deliver water to the village once every two weeks," recalls Sahara who has lived for her entire 40 years in Kalanganan Mother, a remote barangay in this city.

She adds that in the past, potable water was such a precious commodity that she was willing to buy drinking water at P20 per jug, containing 25 gallons of water; just enough for a week's consumption. Those who could not afford this luxury got their supply from shallow wells.

The schedules of the delivery trucks were irregular, and the trucks sometimes did not have sufficient quantities to meet the demand of the more than 6,000 residents of the barangay. Sahara explains that since she lives in the barangay's farthest *purok* (section), delivery trucks often skipped her area.

"When the trucks failed to deliver water, we fetched from the wells, or waited for the rains to come," she recalls.

Of low tides and salty river water

There were times that it simply did not rain when water was needed.

Sahara can still recall vividly when an El Nino-induced dry spell hit the country in 1998, and all of village's shallow wells dried up. Villagers then had to rely on the nearby river for bathing and washing.



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Getting water from the river is not as simple as it appears, and requires monitoring the ebbing of the tide, for when high tide arrives, seawater mixes with the river, and increases its salinity.

“Our fishermen and the villagers living beside the river bank had to taste the water to determine whether it was salty or not,” she explains.

“Matabang den so ig sa lawas a ig” (the river’s water is no longer salty) was the alert for which Sahara and others waited, for it signaled low tide – the only time that potable water could be collected from the river. Low tide sometimes occurred in the early morning hours, and there were several instances when residents woke at two in the morning to collect water.

The water’s salinity was just one of the many factors with which she and other villagers had to contend. Silt, dirt and numerous pollutants sullied the quality of the water. Thus, prior to using the water it was stored inside an open basin to allow sediments to settle to the bottom.

“Until now, I still wonder how we were able to survive then. Luckily, our family did not experience severe illnesses caused by the short supply of potable water in our area, unlike some of our neighbors who were hospitalized due to severe bacterial infections,” she recalls.

From wells to faucets

Gone are the days when Sahara had to heed the low tide alerts. Today, safe drinking water flows freely from a communal faucet erected right in her front yard. Around 20 of her neighbors also benefit from this new addition to their community.

Carrying plastic jugs and water containers, her neighbors flock to her front yard twice a day to collect clean, safe water for drinking and cooking. This has been their routine for about a year and half now, since the village acquired a community water system.

The community water system, to which Sahara’s faucet is connected, was designed and built by USAID’s Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program, in conjunction with the City Government of Cotabato and the Cotabato City Water District (CCWD). Through GEM’s Community Infrastructure Program (CIPs) and the CCWD, the entire barangay of Kalanganan Mother and its neighboring sitios now have a permanent water system complete with transmission pipelines, 16 communal faucets, and a 24-hour water supply.

As part of its “Community Infrastructure Project (CIP)” GEM constructed a 1,844-meter network of pipes leading the barangay, while the CCWD constructed a network of 1,980 meters connecting the



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transmission pipeline to the water source. The CCWD and GEM designed the system, and organized households to identify a leader for every communal faucet.

Communal facility

“The very day the faucets started pouring out water, it was like having a festival here,” exclaims Sahara, at the queue of people excitedly waiting for their turn to try the facility for the first time. She adds that with the 16 communal faucets divided equally among the *barangay*’s eight *puroks*, residents do not have to go far to fetch water.

“It has greatly changed our lives. The water also tastes great, unlike the supply we got from the rain and the shallow wells. Even our coffee and the food we cook now taste better,” she declares.

As a public utility firm, CCWD is responsible for the water distribution, but the 6,000 residents of Kalanganan Mother own the facility. The water company charges the residents P0.016 per liter of water, far less expensive than the water previously purchased from delivery trucks at almost P1.00 per liter.

“With a water system in place, we expect to help lessen, if not eliminate the occurrence of water-borne diseases and to help improve the community’s sanitation practices,” explains Ronaldo Ypil, Regional Manager for Eastern Mindanao of the GEM Program.

He adds that as a counterpart contribution, the City Government of Cotabato provided training to members of the *barangay*’s water users association, in the financial management of the system. Each water cluster leader is responsible for the collection and payment of the monthly fees of member households to the CCWD.

“This is a community project, and the residents here must understand that they also have a role in maintaining the utility to ensure the sustainability of the project,” says Ypil. “The residents have shown interest in participating in community-based activities that further explore the potential of the project.”

Tide of change

Now that Sahara and her neighbors no longer monitor the low tide, nor await the arrival of delivery trucks, she envisions a more progressive Kalanganan Mother in the near future.

“Every time I wash my clothes at the well or see the high tide coming, I feel relieved that our children will no longer go through what I have experienced in the past,” expresses Sahara. **(GEM Program)**